

**FOLLOW-UP: 1998-
2001 WORKFIRST
EVALUATIONS**

REPORT DIGEST

MAY 15, 2003



STATE OF WASHINGTON

JOINT LEGISLATIVE AUDIT AND
REVIEW COMMITTEE

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INTRODUCTION

The Washington Legislature enacted major policy legislation in 1997 to change the direction of this state's public assistance program. That policy change articulated the goals to be achieved through a reformed welfare system, and also directed JLARC to evaluate how these policy goals were being accomplished. From 1998 through 2001, JLARC tracked, evaluated, and reported on the policy outcomes achieved through WorkFirst—Washington's welfare reform effort. As part of its 2003-05 Work Plan, JLARC members directed staff to follow up on the status and progress of WorkFirst in 2003.

This report responds to our Committee's request and builds upon past JLARC studies, which found the program to be effective in meeting legislative goals and objectives. Specifically, this follow-up study focuses on caseload patterns and trends, the effect of the 5-year limit on public assistance eligibility, and performance measures for WorkFirst. Our follow-up report finds:

- **Caseloads** decreased by 37 percent during the program's first six years (1997-2003), and have **not** risen in a time of increased unemployment and a recession regionally and nationally. Despite the overall decline in cases, the **child-only caseload** has risen both in numbers and as a percentage of the caseload.
- The Legislature placed a **5-year, lifetime limit** on eligibility for public assistance under WorkFirst. In August 2002, the first group of clients exceeded that time limit. As a result, some clients who refused to participate in work activities no longer receive cash assistance grants, while those who continue to actively participate in WorkFirst received extensions beyond 60 months. Federal and state laws allow Washington to extend these time limits to as much as 20 percent of the caseload. Currently, Washington has provided **time-limit extensions to 4 percent** of the caseload.
- WorkFirst's **performance measures** appear to be fully integrated into the entire system, both centrally and in the field. Coordination of accountability efforts in the Office of Financial Management continues to ensure that these performance measures are recognized and used at all levels of WorkFirst's operations.